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ABSTRACT

A profile of an effective teacher of Aboriginal Australian students was constructed based on research on the teaching of Aboriginal students. Using the profile as a framework, this paper reports on an ethnographic study of an effective teacher in action with Aboriginal students. The study consisted of semi-participative observation of a teacher of grades 6-7 in a Perth (Australia) metropolitan school in which 45 percent of the students were Aboriginal. Data were gathered via observation, conversation, and recorded interviews with the teacher, principal, and students. Elements identified as critical to effective teaching of Aboriginal students were: an understanding of Aboriginal culture and family background; the teacher's capacity to develop relationships based on openness, flexibility, empathy, and a collegial rather than authoritarian stance; a student-centered, relationship-based pedagogy featuring peer tutoring, small-group work, cooperative learning, and self-responsibility for learning and assessment; and the negotiation of curriculum and other educational processes with students. Behavioral boundaries were set in consultation with students. It is important to Aboriginal students that the behavior, not the student, be rewarded or sanctioned in private. Self-esteem, confidence, and social skills were enhanced in the classroom, although it seemed at times that academic teaching and learning were less intense than expected from a traditional Anglo perspective. (Contains 16 references.) (TD)

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by

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"We learn a lot from Mr Hart": A qualitative study of an effective teacher of Aboriginal students

by

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Abstract

Teachers, schools, and education systems search for means to address the inequities of Aboriginal student participation and achievement in schools. There is no doubt that a critical variable, and perhaps the critical variable, that influences the quality of students' school experience and the quality of their learning outcomes, are teachers. Considerable research in this area has been undertaken, findings of which enable a profile of an effective teacher of Aboriginal students to be constructed. Using this profile as a framework, this paper reports an ethnographic study of an effective teacher in action with Aboriginal students, and in doing so personalises and underscores other relative research outcomes.

The study, conducted with an upper primary teacher in an outer Perth metropolitan school, confirms wider research findings which identify the critical importance of a student-centred relationship based pedagogy built upon an understanding of Aboriginal culture, family background, and a teacher's capacity to develop such relationships; to negotiate curriculum, learning and assessment processes; to be outcome focussed; and be firm but flexible in adapting to the dynamics of student behaviour and need.

Introduction

Ethnographic research, in this case semi-participative observation, provides researchers with opportunities to study a subject and environment in detail, to verify other relative research findings, to find new information, and to personalise research and its implications.

This paper initially examines research on the teaching of Aboriginal students reported in the literature and undertaken in the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Study, and then constructs a profile of the characteristics of an effective teachers of these students. Using this profile as a framework, the main purpose of the paper is then to describe a qualitative study of a teacher in action and to analyse, present, and discuss generated data in order to gauge to what extent that teacher "fits" the profile suggested by research.

The literature

The study was undertaken as part of the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Project. This a joint Edith Cowan University and Education Department of Western Australia Project to research good teaching and school practices that increases attendance, participation, and engagement in learning by Aboriginal students (Partington, Harrison, Godfrey, & Wyatt, 1997; Godfrey, Richer, Partington, Harslett, & Harrison, 1998). Within this Project interview information from teachers identified by students as effective was used to assemble a profile of the characteristics of teachers effective with middle school Aboriginal students (Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, & Richer, 1998).

Strong elements of that profile are that effective teachers have an understanding of Aboriginal culture and histories and of their students' home and family backgrounds and circumstances; an ability to develop good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families; and a capacity to be empathetic, flexible, and to adjust to the dynamics of student behaviour and need. Such relationships are typically built on consistency and fairness with all students, while at the same time there is an understanding and appreciation of student differences and needs. A sense of humour, being able to have a joke, and deliberate investment by teachers of time to recognise and interact with Aboriginal students in the school playground and out of school are further means by which effective teachers build positive relationships with these students. The Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Study (Harslett et al., 1998) suggests that effective teachers are appreciated by Aboriginal students and their parents as good listeners who take time to find things out and don't jump to conclusions, are non-confrontational, don't chastise or embarrass students in front of others, and negotiate classroom behaviour rules and consequences. These teachers adopt a student-centred approach to learning and program student work at appropriate levels, set challenging and achievable standards, provide support, and include cultural relevance and recognition in the curriculum and classroom environment.

A pedagogy based upon relationships rather than authority and teachers having an understanding of Aboriginal culture and student home backgrounds identified in that study, are well represented in other research as the basis for the effective teaching of Aboriginal students. Malin (1990) observed the damaging consequences of a culturally-insensitive and unaware teachers on Aboriginal students and highlighted the need for teachers to be aware that Aboriginal children's socialisation means they bring different perceptions and behaviours to their relationship with teachers compared with those of non-Aboriginal students. According to Malin (1998, p. 240), teachers must appreciate that: "Aboriginal children are less dependent on parent and adult guidance and more accustomed to self-regulation". The importance of teachers taking time to build relationships is reinforced by Malin (1998, p. 242): "Before teachers can be effective they must get to know each student as an individual, as a cultural being, and as a learner". Munns (1998, p. 173) agrees: "Teachers need to recognise that trust and respect are not automatically given" and good teachers, "build positive personal and productive pedagogical relationships with students".

The importance of relevance, expectations, and enjoyment in Aboriginal education is evident in research. Malin (1998, p. 244) indicates that good teachers: "Contextualise in a way that relates to past and present experiences and knowledge". Partington (1998, p. 24) reports that good teachers: "Modify the curriculum so that it more accurately reflects the reality of the lives of Indigenous students" and are "alert to the skills Indigenous students possess rather than focussing on those they do not have". The importance of high expectations and not stereotyping Aboriginal students as troublesome and unable to learn is a consistent theme in the literature (e.g., Malin, 1990; Munns, 1998; Partington et al., 1997). This point was highlighted by Gutman (1992, p. 22) who, in the context of research involving students in years 7 to 9 in two urban Brisbane school, found that: "Teachers who have low expectations of what Aboriginal students can achieve academically are doing them a disservice". That good teachers give students good things to learn about (Gutman, 1992), are stimulating, interesting, and original (Fanshaw, 1989); and teach interesting lessons (Partington et al., 1997) underscores the fact that good teachers are also motivational.

Consistent with the importance given to humour, the ability of teachers to be flexible, and the need for subtlety and sensitivity shown by this study are the views of Munns (1998, p. 175), who concluded that good teachers understand that: "More favourable responses are more likely to be found through humour, resilience, and understanding". In the same study, Munns (p. 175) suggested that good teachers: "Prepare and encourage students to take risks and at the same time are sensitive of Aboriginal students not wanting to betray the group by being successful nor to be shamed by failing".

The characteristics represent universal principles of good teaching. The difference is that effective teachers re-invent such principles within the context of students' cultural and home backgrounds and student strengths and needs. In terms of pedagogic style, Fanshawe (1989, p. 36) described such teachers as "supportive gadflies", who are "warm and demanding".

Dunkin (1997), in the context of an extensive literature review on assessment of effective teachers, cites others (Medley, 1982: Medley & Shannon, 1994) as distinguishing between teacher effectiveness, the degree to which desired effects upon students are achieved; teacher performance, the way in which a teacher behaves in the process of teaching; and teacher competence, the extent to which knowledge and skills defined as necessary qualifications to teach are possessed. In terms of these constructs, the profile of an effective teacher of Aboriginal students identified in the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Study (Harslett et al., 1999), is a combination of the concepts of effectiveness and performance. That is, for the purpose of this paper an effective teacher is defined as one who creates a sensitive, supportive, friendly, and sufficiently demanding environment which attracts Aboriginal students to stay at school and achieve curriculum objectives.

These characteristics and definition provide the framework against which to observe the teacher central to this study.

The study

The study is located in an outer Perth metropolitan primary school. The street opposite the school is lined with older style Homeswest houses many of which are run down. A major road runs along the school's northern boundary. The school building is in keeping with the era represented by the surrounding houses and is classified by the Education Department of Western Australia as a "hard to staff" school. The school has a student population of around 300 students, 45 percent of whom are Aboriginal. The teacher under study, to be known as Mr Hart, is in his fifth year of teaching with a group of 26 students in years 6 and 7, nine of whom are Aboriginal. This is the teacher's third year at this school having previously spent two years in an Aboriginal community school in the Kimberley Region of Western Australian. The teacher was identified by the principal, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW), and Aboriginal students as a "good" teacher with Aboriginal students. Permission to undertake the study was negotiated with the teacher, school principal, and signed consent obtained from all parents and students. Pseudonyms are used when reference is made to observations and the views of specific students. The nature and purpose of the research was explained and discussed at Parent and Citizen Association and ASSPA meetings.

The study was undertaken one day a week over a ten week period, although on numerous occasions interest and special events motivated the researcher to visit the school more frequently. The teacher and students knew the observer was a University researcher and that his aim was to observe the way teaching and learning was taking place in the classroom. It was discussed that the researcher would spend time observing and writing notes, speaking to the teacher and to students at quiet times during lessons, would join in activities, have conversations, and would interview the teacher and students on audio tape. The students were excited about the project and as the parties got to know each other, so classroom dynamics normalised.

The focus of the researcher's observations were the pedagogy of the particular teacher in action, the culture of the classroom, and the behavioural and learning responses of the students. Data for this study was gathered in the form of observation and conversation notes, and formal audio cassette recorded interviews with the teacher, school principal, AIEW, and students. Direct citing from these sources is indicated in quotation marks.

Findings

There is no doubt that Mr Hart is a popular teacher in the eyes of his students. "It is the best class", "Mr Hart is the best teacher in the whole world", and "I am so happy that I am in Mr Hart's room this year". These remarks, though extravagant, are typical of those of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in this teacher's classroom and represent the overwhelming stamp of approval evident from observation and interviews. Using a semi-structured interview, responses to: "What do you like most about being in Mr Hart's classroom?" - provides reasons for his popularity. Analysis reveals two significant clusters of responses to this question. The first is helpfulness: "He helps you a lot", "explains", "makes work easier", and "helps you understand" are typical responses from all students. That he "makes lessons fun", "gives you exciting things to do", "gives you different things", and "is not boring" is the second cluster

of responses. In response to the question: "What is good about the way Mr Hart teaches you?" - helpfulness is most frequently cited followed by making lessons fun and giving rewards. As well as helpfulness and funniness, identified by most Aboriginal students, they also appreciate that "he lets you be independent - you can go and get other kids to help you", and that "he has patience". These views are born out in the classroom where it is evident that the teacher has the personal disposition and skills to create these relationships essential for effectiveness with Aboriginal students (Harslett et al., 1998; Munns, 1998).

For these students the day begins with regimentation. When the bell goes all students, with no teacher coercion, seat themselves in a line on the verandah floor outside of their classroom and wait to go into class. There is student pride in this regime: "We are the most well behaved class - we always line up straight" and "we line up without being asked", are typical student comments. Students then enter the classroom, go to their desks which at the time were arranged to facilitate groups of four students, take out their spelling work books and commence the morning program with minimum teacher direction. Some students are slow to engage. David (an Aboriginal student), for example is not working, is swinging back on his chair, and having a conversation with a student at the next set of desks. Since the beginning of the lesson the teacher has moved from student to student giving individual assistance. The teacher kneels next to students and talks about individual progress, objectives, and takes a personal interest in each. It is apparent the teacher is aware of David and has strategically avoided highlighting him by not taking him to task at the commencement of the lesson. With all other students on task the teacher moves to David, settles him into his work and addresses his behaviour by appealing to his sense of responsibility: "I have given you a fair bit of lee-way. You haven't been doing much. You are expected to be responsible". This conversation is personal with the teacher kneeling on the floor talking quietly with the student. This style of teaching and managing of student behaviour requires confidence and for the teacher to have brought students to a stage of independence and responsibility as features of classroom culture. This style of teaching is confirmed as good practice by Malin (1998) who found that good teachers of Aboriginal students have expectations, are interventionists, and are appreciated by students for calmness, easiness, and gentle speaking.

Student independence, responsibility, and respect are key elements of the teacher's philosophy; as he explains: "All of these things you notice are aimed to the point where if I am not there they will continue to behave and learn. I am not going to be with them all the time. I certainly will not be with them at high school". This philosophy is evident in the teacher's student-centred pedagogy and his relationship with students. For example during a Design Make and Appraise (DMA) project students are in groups of three and four and are working independently of the teacher and are engaged in discussion and tasks with the teacher acting as a motivator and facilitator. This pedagogy is again evident when the students are doing process writing and engage in peer assessment and review of each others work. An analysis of interviews with students confirms they like this way of learning: "All students agreed that teaching each other is something they like about being in Mr Hart's classroom".

These behaviours are central to the classroom "Code of Honour" negotiated with students. Students have ownership of the classroom rules and consider them fair. This is evident when asked during interviews if classroom rules are fair, the overwhelming response was positive with comments such as: "Our classroom rules are more fair than in any other classroom". When asked why the rules were fair, representative responses were: "I think they are fair because we are the ones who really chose the rules", and "Yes, they are fair - we chose them". The negotiation of classroom rules with students as well as in other areas such as curriculum and assessment are critical elements of student-centred schooling which is recognised as best practice for all middle school students (Schools Council, 1993; Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996).

A classroom culture where students are equal partners in education, rather than one of teacher dominance-student submission, is seen by Partington et al. (1997) as an important factor that influences Aboriginal students to stay on at school and succeed. This culture is evident in Mr Hart's room during lesson transmission and conclusion. For example, at the end of the time allocated to spelling and for students to commence mathematics the transition is undertaken with no teacher guidance. Notes record that while the transition to the next lesson is occurring: "The teachers is now talking casually to a student about the week-end". At a point where the students seem ready to commence the mathematics period the

teacher directs all students to put their hands on their heads. Students do this routinely and instantly. This is a strategy to regroup students who are then instructed to prepare for a mental arithmetic exercise which, when completed, they mark themselves. Students independently continue working from a book of mathematical problem solving exercises. There is busy noise as students help each other. When the school bell rings for morning recess, students tidy their desks and in their own time leave the room. The teacher calls a student back because he has not left his desk tidy. The dismissal is low key, informal, and with a clear sense of expected student responsibility. A number of students voluntarily stay behind to talk to the teacher. They move out of the room with him as he goes to the playground and commences to play basketball with students. After recess the students engaged in process writing. Again they are left to themselves to follow a clearly set out process within which students engaged in peer assessment and review of each other's work. During this session an Aboriginal girl arrived back to class late. She went to her desk, commenced working, and later the teacher made low profile one to one contact with the student to ascertain the reason for her lateness and to discuss circumstances. The teacher explained that: "To have taken her to task and read the riot act would have been counter productive". Relationship building by the teacher was further observed during the same period when it was noted that: "The teacher is having a discussion on the side with Margaret (An Aboriginal girl) about attending school – Margaret is smiling". Being in the classroom one senses that students value and take pride in their autonomy and partnership with their teacher.

The session just described has been one of the teacher facilitating learning, use of student-centred techniques, and clear behavioural and work expectations. By lunch time these students, with unobtrusive direction from the teacher, have completed the morning program. They were expected and trusted to work independently and be responsible for their learning. There was a strong sense of student-centredness in all aspects of the classroom environment, for example, rules had been negotiated, peer tutoring and co-operative learning widely practised, symbols of authority such as ceremonial entering and leaving the classroom and lesson transition minimalised, and evident non-interventionist behaviour management techniques. The teacher provided continual individual attention; gave on the spot instruction, encouragement, and feedback; and engaged in informal conversation.

A range of rules, rewards, and sanctions are in place and used to maintain an environment in which students can engage in active student-centred learning. Reference has been made to a negotiated code of honour which when broken results in a hierarchy of consequences. The major reward system is teacher praise and trust. A combination of the two is illustrated when the students presented their school assembly item. Prior to the assembly the students went by themselves to the assembly area to prepare for the presentation of their item. The teacher related that he deliberately did not accompany them. They were to organise themselves, and he was very proud of the trust and independence that had been developed. The group presented the item with confidence. It was well received by the audience, and the students returned with a sense of pride. The teacher praised the group for the quality of their performance, all the more deserving since they had been unassisted.

Another reward system linked to fostering independence is the in-class "School Bank". Students earn dollars as rewards for behaviour, achievement, and acts of "classroom citizenship". With earnings they can purchase opportunities, such as time on the classroom computer. It was not uncommon to see Aboriginal students who had "bought" time on the computer to be working independently or in pairs. For example, "Thelma is on the computer. She paid for time with School Bank money". During the same incident this student demonstrated independence, initiative, and empowerment when she had a problem regarding the internet. Notes record that: "Without asking permission she went to the deputy principal in the next room to get help. This behaviour is encouraged". Rewards, to be expected, are well received by students. An Aboriginal boy remarked; "Mr Hart is strict but he is nice. He rewards you – like with the bank".

"Checks" are used to sanction a range of behaviours. For example, observation notes record: "Six students were given checks for not paying attention when messages were given over the school PA system" and "Tanya has received a check for not paying attention and Jane for playing with her pencil". Checks add up to "blue slips" which result in offenders being sent to the deputy principal for possible detention in the school resolution ("reso") room. While students in this classroom exercise a great deal of independence and autonomy, there exists boundaries that if transgressed result in consequences.

Boundaries and consequences are accepted by Aboriginal students so long as they have been negotiated, are fairly and consistently administered, focus on the incident not the student, and then forgotten (Malin, 1998; Harslett et al, 1998).

Critical to this teacher's approach in maintaining good relationships with students is that, as he said: "It is the behaviour not the student that is rewarded or sanctioned". The emphasis in managing student behaviour is respect for the rights of others, to be responsible, and to be trustworthy. Important also is the subtle manner by which the teacher manages student behaviour. For example, "during recess the teacher is having a discussion with two students. He is quiet, he is firm, and he is putting the problem with the students – 'what are you going to do about it'. He (teacher) is dealing with the students on a one–to-one, not in the presence of others". However, to be expected, there were mixed responses to the interview question: "When you get into trouble do you think Mr Hart is fair?" Non-Aboriginal students perceived the teacher to be fairer than did the Aboriginal students. For example, some Aboriginal students considered: "It is fair if you get into trouble" and "he tries to treat you with respect – then it's fair to treat him with respect". Others remarked: "If the other person is talking he will give you a check. If someone talks to me and I talk back I will get the check – that's not fair", and "if he likes you he lets you off". Research by Harslett et al. (1998) found that it is important to Aboriginal students that acts of misbehaviour be treated as an incident, sanctioned, then forgotten. To do otherwise is strongly resented by Aboriginal students who, as mentioned earlier, are prepared to accept fair and consistent controls.

A powerful element in the teacher's strategy to establish good relationships and manage student behaviour is humour and fun: "When kids are losing it I will have a bit of fun – brings the students together". Spending informal interaction time with students, joining in with them, and sharing personal events and information are other strategic elements in establishing positive student behaviour and so facilitate conditions for student-centred learning to take place. The principal's comment that: "He is rarely in the staff room, he is usually out with students", confirms observations of the teacher's practice of informal interaction with students. To facilitate this interaction the teacher adopts an informal dress code. He regularly wears tracksuits, sports shorts, tee shirts, and sports shoes. When asked about his dress code, he explains:

> A lot of my dress code is based simple on the fact that I get out at lunch time and recess and play and mix with the kids, I spend little time in and around the staff room. It also suits me in the classroom where I kneel down with students and sometimes sit on the floor and work with groups. I can be more flexible. I've often thought that if anyone walks into the school they would probably think I was the physical education teacher.

When asked what they thought of the way their teacher dressed, a representative view was: "He likes blending with the children. Most teachers act posh. He likes being the same and then we don't think differently". When asked if their parents are happy with the way the teacher dresses, a chorus response was: "Yes - they think he is an excellent teacher".

The teacher's style of joining in with students is illustrated during a morning fitness session when his offer to race students is enthusiastically accepted. On another occasion the teacher remained, although alternative arrangements had been made, with a group of students who were unable to attend a visiting puppet show. Notes record: "The teacher has chosen not to go and to take advantage of the opportunity to do reading with five students. At the moment he is sitting on the floor with the students near the heater. The students are engaged and the teacher is in with them".

The teacher's strategy of sharing personal events and information is illustrated when asked why he thought students enjoyed being in his classroom:

> I think it is because I involve them in every thing. I recently got married and we actually invited the children to our wedding. The kids all know how old I am and they know my first name. They do not abuse the fact. They are made to feel they are valued as people beyond just being a student. I think that is extremely important for them. It is extremely important for me. They tell me all sorts of things about themselves and home. So as an even relationship I think I should tell them things about what I do. I just bought a dog - I tell them things like that. They asked me why I have

an old clapped out white car. I tell them why I have this car, instead of mind your own business.

It is apparent this teacher's pedagogy is based upon relationships rather than authority. It is also a pedagogy that stresses independence, co-operative learning and responsibility where the teacher is a facilitator and source of information. It is apparent also that the teacher provides an environment where there is a clear and enforced code of behaviour, where students feel they are treated fairly, are happy, and have a personable and approachable teacher. It is a learning environment where students exhibit high levels of independence, an ability to work co-operatively, and to accept responsibility for undertaking, completing and evaluating their own work. It is an environment in which students also consider learning takes place. This is evident when asked: "Do you think you learn a lot with Mr Hart?" This question elicited an almost unanimous positive response. Reservations were held by some non-Aboriginal students: "Yes-hmm- I have learnt more with other teachers but it wasn't as much fun" and "I think we learn enough but some of the higher people who know what they are doing don't learn as much as they need to get". When asked if the work they are given is hard, the view by all students is represented in the response: "Sometimes, but when he gives you hard work he helps you" - an attribute of good teachers of Aboriginal students identified by Gutman (1992).. The School's AIEW confirms the view of students, evident in interview notes which record: "Aboriginal kids see him as a good teacher – he can be demanding but can have fun – he has that balance between 'fun' and work".

The class room weekly timetable and teacher's planning indicates that the learning program is based on the eight learning areas required of all schools in Western Australia. The teacher, as he says: "Adopts an integration approach where ever possible and tries to organise subject matter around what they (students) want – you have to organise things in a fashion so they want to be there (at school)". Curriculum integration is evident, for example, in DMA where students integrate science, mathematics, library, and practical skills, and in the use of "aliens" as the current theme around which opportunities are planned to integrate curriculum objectives. Individual differences are accommodated through self-paced work and teacher one-to-one assistance. For example, in conversation with two Aboriginal students, notes record their explanation of how spelling is taught: "All students commence a new unit each week. It is up to students to finish off the previous unit in their own time. According to these girls this is a good arrangement they enjoy working in pairs and testing each other. The teacher checks their completed exercises each Friday".

Judging student learning outcomes from a relationship and student-centred based pedagogy requires appreciation of more than statistical entries in a teacher's marks book, it requires a wider appreciation of behavioural and social as well as academic outcomes. It also requires mental disengagement from traditional authoritative and subordinated pedagogy models with a language of tests, grades, ranking, pass, fail, and average performance. The teacher in this study reluctantly provides student performance statistics as required by the school and system. As he said: "I don't do a great deal in the way of formal testing. We do Monitoring Standard in Education (system required data) and other testing for the school Management Information System (school required data). This is a bit artificial". The teacher is inclined towards a more informal on the job approach, as he says: "I find a far better way is by informal questioning and observation based upon the fact that if they can't use it when it is actually asked for, then its not actually valuable to them. For instance in DMA we might have a maths problem that arises and I find if they can't answer that right away then that gives me some data for assessment".

While appreciating the strengths of this teacher, the researcher was at times sceptical of productivity levels, for example in the following scenario:

> 9.55: Students are returning to their desks and getting organised to do maths. They are left to themselves to get into pods. Pods are self help groups. The approach relies upon peer tutoring, small groups, and collaboration between students.
>
> 9.30: Students have been on task. All students indicated, when asked on a one-to-one basis, that they liked working in small groups, didn't mind helping each other, and could work at an individual pace. Some of the weaker students are battling and the less popular are not readily accepted or aided by classroom peers.

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> 10.15: Students have been busy. Two Aboriginal boys are working together on the computer. The atmosphere is good but tangible productivity is low. Students choose the rate at which they work. It is a risk free environment. A solid body of work has not been produced or marked!

Observation notes regularly record frustration with the apparent low level of academic productivity, for example: "The teacher is still talking about school photos and taking valuable morning skill time. How can students get a quantity of work done". Such observations tempted the researcher to record: " Perhaps students like being in this classroom because they are not under pressure and are not exposed to failure". Students also expressed their frustration when asked what changes they would like to see in the classroom. Many students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal considered that Mr Hart should: "Stop talking so much" and, as one Aboriginal student put it: "He can be annoying when he talks so much". The principal is also frustrated with the ambivalence of this style of teaching, while she recognises the teacher's strengths as "tolerance, flexibility, encouraging students to take control of their learning, and being a facilitator", she is also thoughtful that the teacher does not "teach enough" and that "the students are not learning a body of knowledge", but concludes: "I suppose all his children are making good progress".

Ambivalence by the principal and researcher and the positive view of the AIEW, gives a cue for a brief consideration of cultural perceptions of good teaching. Such perceptions are demonstrated in a study by Malin (1994) who arranged separate Anglo and Aboriginal panellists to observe an identified "good" Anglo teacher and a "good" Aboriginal teacher. The study found the perceptions of good teaching were consistent with culture. The Anglo panellists considered the Anglo teacher to be in touch with student learning needs, allowed leeway for collaboration, was innovative, organised, prepared, efficient in orchestrating lesson transitions, and task oriented. The Aboriginal panellists considered the same teacher to be overly authoritarian, insensitive, bossy, unapproachable, and that students were subservient and treated in a condescending manner. By contrast the Anglo panellists considered the Aboriginal teacher to be under prepared, disorganised, did not establish a context for student contribution, and was detached. The Aboriginal panellist however, saw the Aboriginal teacher as using appropriate means of control, providing a happy environment where students are freer, can relax and socialise, and are treated as equals. Overall Aboriginal panellists felt that the Anglo teacher was more concerned with task and order than relationships and so the students suffered. All panellist described the Anglo teacher as more task oriented and the Aboriginal teacher as less authoritarian. One can see in the teaching of Mr Hart attributes of both styles and hence his appeal to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. However, a critical element of effective teaching with all students is rigour in the achievement of student curriculum outcomes. Fanshawe (1989, p. 40) found that Aboriginal students most like teachers who are "warm and demanding", and Gutman (1992, p. 21) that "Aboriginal children, like most other children, enjoy achieving in the academic arena and want their achievements recognised".

This teacher's effectiveness with Aboriginal students is reiterated by an Indigenous doctoral student, who has undertaken case study research of individual Aboriginal students in the same school. One case study was of a year 7 Aboriginal boy who had a record of high absenteeism during earlier primary school years, inappropriate school behaviour, and inconsistent academic achievement. This boy had witnessed his mother as a drug addict, witnessed domestic violence, witnessed a family member die of a heart attack, and had several homes and caregivers. The doctoral student relates how this student, with Mr Hart as his teacher, made dramatic progress with improvements in behaviour, school attendance, and learning outcomes. In her view, this was because the teacher recognised the student's academic potential and because: "Mr Hart is a really good teacher of Aboriginal kids. They like being in his classroom, therefore they come to school more often, and so they have the chance to learn more". She went on to elaborate: "It's the way he treats kids - he gets out and plays basketball with them, treats them as equals, lets them have a say, understands where Aboriginal kids are coming from, and dressed in a way that was appreciated by the students" (C.Kickett-Tucker, personal interview, 19 May 99).

Mr Hart considers his strength as a teacher is an ability to empathise with students: "I know where the students are coming from. I understand their words and their backgrounds and how they got there and the situation they are in". The ability to get on with students and develop relationships is a further strength identified by the teacher, as he said: "The fact that I actually value spending time with them, informally and formally, from the laugh in the playground to the twinkle in the eye when a concept is

grasped in the classroom". When asked why he is popular with his students, his reply was: "Its not so much me they like, they like being in the classroom". The teacher has created a classroom where students have ownership and empowerment: "Wendy you don't have to knock, this is your classroom, just let me know that you have returned," was a reminder given to a student. Notes record that: "The teacher often negotiates with students the re-arrangement of desks – some want to sit next to friends and some want to sit next to someone that has agreed to help them". It is an environment where students are free to help each other: "Marion has moved across the room to ask Michael (both Aboriginal students) for help – Michael is willing to help"; and to approach the teacher: "Again, a student, without ceremony, has left his desk, gone over to the teacher, and engaged in dialogue to do with the lesson". It is a classroom where students are encouraged and supported in risk taking: "Tanya (Aboriginal student) I know you have a response in your head but you are afraid to say it. Someone give me a dumb answer. Terry gives a dumb answer to demonstrate its OK to have a go. Tanya gives an answer and receives encouragement". Such a classroom culture characterised by student ownership, empowerment, and risk taking has considerable endorsement by research as conducive to Aboriginal student attendance and achievement (Malin, 1990, 1998; Partington et al., 1997; Munns, 1998; Harslett et al., 1998).

Conclusion

Mr Hart does not fit the usual teacher mould. He dresses differently and he spends more of his lunch and recess time in the playground than in the staff room. His colleagues see him as different; evident when his principal states: "He is different and he sees himself as different and as an individual he values that very much". His pedagogy is different to the point where it challenges the comfort zone of traditionalists. The difference that is most striking is in the eyes of his students; which the following incidents illustrate:

> During recess I was talking with an Aboriginal girl and two of her year 7 friends from the other year 7 classroom arrived. We introduced ourselves and I took advantage of the warmth of the moment to seek some information. I asked which was the best year seven class to be in. They all agreed that they would like to be in Mr Hart's room. When asked why, they responded that they had been with him last year and that he was fun. When asked with whom they learnt most they all said they had learnt most with Mr Hart.

This view was endorsed when a similar situation arose with two non-Aboriginal boys:

> I was talking near the basket ball goal with Graeme, when Barry from the other year 7 classroom arrived. We commenced a conversation and I asked which year 7 class they would sooner be in, they agree that they would sooner be in Mr Hart room. Again, because it was more fun, and again, they agreed they learnt a lot with Mr Hart.

The data gathered in this study shows that Mr Hart exhibits the research based characteristics of an effective teacher and fits the profile of such teachers of Aboriginal students. Key characteristics of this teacher are having an understanding of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal students home background and family circumstances; an ability to develop good relationships based upon openness, flexibility, empathy, and a collegial rather than authoritarian teacher-student partnership; and a student-centred pedagogy featuring peer tutoring, co-operative learning, self-responsibility for learning and assessment, small group work; and negotiated curriculum. Firm behavioural boundaries are set in consultation with students within which students exercise a great deal of freedom, informality, humour, and fun based upon trust, respect, and responsibility. Student achievement in this environment is to be appreciated across a diversity of curriculum domains. There is no doubt that self esteem, confidence, and social skills are enhanced, although it seemed at times that academic teaching and learning in this classroom was less intense than usually expected from a traditional Anglo perspective, a factor that threatens an otherwise impressive profile.

Importantly, the profile of the characteristics of good pedagogy in teaching Aboriginal students constructed from previous research and confirmed by this study, is corroborated from Indigenous perspectives by Aboriginal students, an AIEW, and an Aboriginal post graduate researcher, all in positions to make credible judgements on Mr Hart as a teacher of Aboriginal students.

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